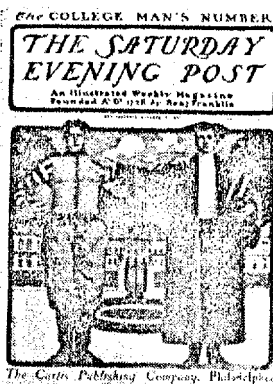




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## Death of an Institution

The venerable Saturday Evening Post finally expired last week after obituary writers had been burying it since 1961. That was the year when the Post's parent company, the Curtis Publishing Co. (Holiday, Jack and Jill among other publications), first showed a loss. But even though the magazine's demise had been expected, the accounts differed on the causes of death. Announcing that the Feb. 8 issue would be the Post's last, Curtis' president Martin S. Ackerman said the magazine was dying because it had failed to attract enough advertising. "Apparently there is just not the need for our product in today's scheme of living," the 36-year-old attorney noted. Ackerman's somber words were in marked contrast to the Churchillian pledge he made when he took over as Curtis's chief executive officer last April. "As long as I am here there will not be a last issue of The Saturday Evening Post," he had said then.

There is no question that Madison Avenue lost faith in the Post. Advertising pages last year numbered 904—compared with 4,425 in 1950—and Ackerman reported that the Post lost some \$5 million in 1968. The outlook for this year was just as bleak. Ackerman said the directors decided to cease publication when it became clear that the magazine would be unable to achieve the 1,000 ad pages he calculated it needed to turn a profit. Since 1961 Curtis has reported losses of about \$62 million, most of this attributed to the unprofitable Post. These years, which witnessed TV's rising share in ad budgets, were a time of testing for all publications—but the general-interest magazines felt the most heat. "An advertiser," observed one industry analyst, "isn't going to place his ads in Life, Look and the Post—and the one he'd most likely drop is the Post. Actually, it's a wonder the magazine didn't die years ago."

But it would be unfair to place all the blame on the ad agencies and their clients. In truth, editorially the Post has been an uncertain trumpet in recent years. Says one Post writer: "I think we were last in line with our 'Laugh-In' cover. We did it after everyone else." A former SEP editor adds: "When the

crunch was on, real genius was required. The Post's top men were talented, energetic—but none of them were geniuses." The Post's face—from Rockwell's pure American covers to the final botched cover depicting Chicago's Mayor Daley—has been its fortune, reflecting changes in editorial content as well as national life-styles.

**Cushy:** Complacent management also played a part in destroying the Post. Working for Curtis was considered one of the cushiest jobs in publishing—rarely did anyone quit, even more rarely was anyone fired. When Matthew Culligan took over in 1962 he dismissed 2,200 of the company's 9,000 employees. While other companies were busily diversifying in broadcasting and television, Curtis remained interested only in magazines; incredibly enough, it turned down chances to buy CBS and ABC. Assuming Curtis control last year, Ackerman complained that "the company is too fully integrated. It is one of the few publishing firms that starts out with trees and ends up with magazines."

**Wealthy:** Through most of its life the Post was one of the most successful magazines ever published. Cyrus H.K. Curtis bought the magazine—which liked to trace its lineage back to Benjamin Franklin's Pennsylvania Gazette—for \$1,000 in 1897. Soon afterward he installed George H. Lorimer, a minister's son from Boston, as editor. Curtis's editorial philosophy was "get the right editor and you'll have the right magazine." For the next 38 years there was no doubt where the Post stood. It preached conservative Republicanism, extolled big business, castigated Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and in the process became remarkably wealthy. There was also no doubt who the magazine's readers were. Doctors and dentists displayed it in their waiting rooms, a generation of boys delivered it door to door through the leafy streets of small-town (no one talked of suburbs then) and rural America. Intellectuals scoffed at the Post's red, white and blue stance: "It is as standardized as soda crackers," complained Upton Sinclair. But the magazine also published stories by the finest writers of the time—Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, Thomas Wolfe, F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner.

The Saturday Evening Post became an institution of sorts, even to the point of determining the size of mailboxes. Every Thursday the great middle class curled up with the Post to follow the adventures of Mr. Moto, Alexander Botts and Clarence Budington Kelland's hero Scattergood Baines, to eavesdrop on Pete Martin's chatty interviews with Hollywood stars, and to be comforted by the covers of Norman Rockwell. Rockwell's paintings were supposed to mirror the America that read the Post. But more and more the reality wasn't there, any more—if it ever was.

America was going urban and was mesmerized by TV. Millions of former general-magazine readers now read only the TV listings regularly. Television delivered the coup de grace to Collier's in 1956. But dour Ben Hibbs, who edited the Post from 1942 to 1961, was still able to put out a readable magazine by stressing brevity, selecting more non-fiction and using brighter layouts. Somehow he managed to keep the magazine profitable. He was the last Post editor that could.

At the insistence of financiers who held Curtis notes, Robert MacNeal stepped aside as company president in 1962 and was replaced by Matthew (Call me Joe) Culligan, an ebullient former advertising salesman who wore a black eye patch to cover an injury he received in the Battle of the Bulge. As an NBC vice president, Culligan had acquired a reputation of



Michael Evans—New York Times

Emerson's postmortem; Black-tie affair

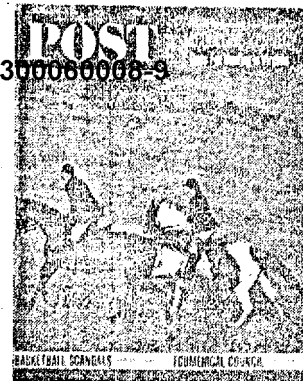
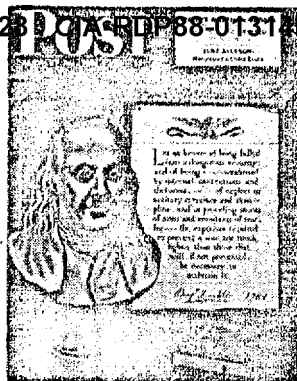
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turning around unprofitable operations. Almost immediately Culligan reduced the Post to 45 issues a year, cleared dead wood and embarked on an aggressive advertising sales campaign. He reorganized the editorial staff, naming an adman as publisher of each of Curtis's publications and selecting Clay Blair, a brash, young former Time-Life reporter as editorial director of all the magazines.

**Notoriety:** Under Blair the Post experimented in "sophisticated muckraking." "If we infuriate individuals or make them uncomfortable," he said, "that will have to be." In 1963, an Atlanta jury ruled that former University of Georgia coach Wally Butts had been libeled in a Post article called "The Story of a College Football Fix," and awarded him \$3,060,000 (later the amount was reduced to \$460,000). At the end of 1963 there was \$27,060,000 in libel suits filed against the Post. The Post's new notoriety scarcely brought in as many readers as it drove away. Blair's casual journalism and his leadership of the "palace revolt" to oust Culligan resulted in his own ouster.

His successor was William A. Emerson Jr., an ebullient Southerner and former NEWSWEEK senior editor. Aided by managing editor Otto Friedrich, he produced such trenchant exposés as "The Mafia: How It Bleeds New England." Emerson also tried to shed the Post's Norman Rockwell image by seeking out young readers with stories on hippie fashions, pop posters and the love-rock musical "Hair." Despite the aggressive search for a new image, the Post, which in 1965 became a biweekly, continued to lose millions every year.

Still another management reshuffling was imminent, and last year Ackerman was called in. Ackerman's Perfect Film & Chemical Corp.—a film processor and mail-order merchandiser—loaned Curtis \$5 million of the \$12 million it had borrowed from banks. Ackerman also got a \$5 million loan from Time Inc. Agreeing to give the Post one last chance to turn a profit, Ackerman decided the magazine needed a "class" instead of "mass" audience; he lopped off 3 million of the Post's 6.4 million subscribers. Most of the unwanted subscribers supposedly were older, rural readers whom advertisers didn't consider active consumers. Ackerman sold off Curtis's Philadelphia headquarters and sold two of the company's publications, Ladies' Home Journal and Amer-

ican Home, to Downe Communications, Inc. To achieve greater financial flexibility, he spun off The Saturday Evening Post Co.—which would publish Holiday, Status, Jack and Jill as well as the Post—from the parent Curtis Publishing Co.

Of course, Ackerman didn't save the Post—and last week some people in publishing circles uncharitably suggested that he never intended to; rather he planned to use the company's tax-loss carry-forward as attractive enticement for a merger. Said Ackerman: "If I had intended to liquidate the Post from the beginning I certainly would have gone about it differently. I put every ounce of energy I had into that magazine." Ackerman also pointed out that the company itself has used up all but \$3 million of the tax carry-forward, hardly an inducement for a merger.

**Investment:** Though The Saturday Evening Post has gone the way of Collier's, The Saturday Evening Post Co. remains. And Ackerman announced that the company would continue to publish its two remaining monthlies, Holiday and Status, which Ackerman claims are making money. The company, he said, had also bought 4 per cent of the Lin Broad-casting Corp. for \$3.5 million. Lin is a communications conglomerate engaged in radio and television broadcasting and antenna television systems operation. Ackerman will be Lin's president and chief executive officer. The Post company, according to Ackerman, has another \$12.5 million for "investment in the communications business."

Ackerman remarked that although a number of magazines—including Life and Look—have offered to fulfill the Post's reader subscription, a decision has not yet been made. While Ackerman was announcing the death of their magazine, Post staffers joked quietly and sipped champagne. Senior editor Donald Allan, who was managing editor of The Reporter when it folded seven months ago, showed up for work wearing a black tie.

Yet no one was writing any epitaphs for the Post's 41-member editorial staff. "They're a masterfully intelligent group," says Emerson. "I'm sure they'll all get jobs." Perhaps the real occasion for a postmortem is the lot of the free-lance writer. With Collier's and the Post now dead there is no weekly outlet left for the long, free-lance magazine article that pays the rent and food bills.

